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Inclusive Event Planning Guide

A practical guide to planning events where every attendee actually feels like they belong.

Too often, events are planned with logistics in mind and inclusion as an afterthought. Not out of malice, but because no one stopped to ask: Will everyone in the room feel like they belong here?

This guide helps you embed inclusive principles into your events before the invites go out.

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Before You Send Those Event Invites: An Inclusive Event Planning Guide

Whether you're planning a team offsite, a holiday party, a leadership retreat, or an end of year gathering, use this guide as a practical reference before, during, and after your event to make sure everyone in the room actually feels like they belong. This is also helpful for industry events where you're inviting people who are not employees.

1. Intentionally Build a Representative Guide List

Don't wait until the photo is taken. Ask who is on this list and who is missing. If you're having trouble identifying diverse attendees, that's a signal, not an excuse.

Common Pitfall: Assuming your default network will produce a diverse room. If you keep inviting the same people, you'll keep getting the same photos.

2. Thoughtfully Choose an Event Date

Check for conflicts with religious holidays and cultural observances before finalizing. A quick search can help you avoid scheduling your big offsite on a significant day for a portion of your team. This is also why it's important to plan in advance. Give people ample time to make the necessary arrangements for child or dependent care. Advance notice can help people prioritize and move things around to attend your event. obligations before your plan

Common Pitfall: Locking in the date before checking observances or failing to provide advance notice and then scrambling to accommodate, or worse, not accommodating at all.

3. Build a Menu that Reflects Your Attendees

Dietary restrictions aren't just preferences. They're often a result of important cultural, religious, or medical needs. Offer halal, kosher, vegan, and gluten free options. Make non-alcoholic beverages equally visible and available, and don't make them an afterthought.

Common Pitfall: Providing one token non-alcoholic option or a single vegetarian dish. If someone has to ask around to find something they can eat or drink, you missed the mark.

4. Provide Guidance on Attire

Tell people what to wear. Better yet, show people what to wear. This removes anxiety, ensures no one feels out of place, and signals that you've thought about the full experience not just the agenda. Provide visual representation of the attire and provide a mixture of options. Be sure the models, if you use them, are also representative of different body types and sizes, different races, and include people with disabilities as well.

Common Pitfall: Leaving attire vague or assuming "everyone knows." Nothing kills belonging faster than walking in underdressed or overdressed.

5. Review Your Programming and Speakers

Is your keynote, performer, or facilitator representative? If you're including a panel, are the panelists representative? Have you considered intersectionality? Are activities accessible and culturally sensitive? Apply an inclusive lens to the full agenda, not just the guest list.

Common Pitfall: An all-white, all-male speaker lineup at an event meant to celebrate inclusion. People notice and they remember. Be sure the people you're intending to host see themselves represented on stage.

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During the Event

1. Be an Inclusive Host

Designate yourself and others to pay attention to how people are experiencing the event in real time. Address concerns as they arise. Don't defer, dismiss, or promise to follow up and then forget.

Common Pitfall: Assuming everything is fine because no one complained. People often don't say anything in the moment. That's why it's helpful to have a good read on the room.

2. Create Intentional Connection Opportunities

Don't assume people will naturally mingle across differences. Build in structured moments that give people a reason to connect with someone they might not already know.

Consider the following:

- A facilitated icebreaker at the start
- Assigned or rotated seating for a shared meal
- Small group discussions with mixed participants
- A cross-functional activity or challenge

Common Pitfall: Free-form mingling that reinforces existing cliques. Without structure, people gravitate to who they already know and those who are new or different end up on the margins.

3. Pay Attention to Who Is Engaged and Who Isn't

Notice who is sitting alone, who isn't speaking up. Then do something about it. Introduce yourself, make an introduction to someone else, create an opening, or simply check in. Even a small gesture communicates that you see them.

Common Pitfall: Focusing on the loudest voices and the most connected attendees. The people who feel most out of place are often the quietest — and most in need of a welcoming moment.

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After the Event

1. Gather Feedback That Goes Beyond Logistics

Send a short survey that includes questions about inclusion and belonging, not just logistics.

Consider asking the following questions:

- Did you feel welcomed?
- Did you feel represented?
- What aspect(s) of the event helped you feel included?
- What, if anything, can we do in the future to help increase your sense of belonging at this event or events like these?

Common Pitfall: A survey that only asks about the venue, food, and scheduling. You'll miss the opportunity to demonstrate how much inclusion matters to you and gather helpful information about the guest experience.

2. Close the Loop With Your Attendees

Share a brief summary of the feedback you received with attendees and what you're committing to do differently next time. Transparency builds trust and it signals that you actually care about their experience both now and in the future.

Common Pitfall: Collecting feedback that disappears into a folder. If you ask and don't share back, you're at risk of breaking trust and people might stop providing helpful feedback.

3. Look at the Photos Before You Post Them

Before you upload that group shot to LinkedIn or your internal channels, ask the following questions:

- Does this photo tell the story we want to tell about our culture?
- Does this photo reflect the diversity of our organization, employees, members or key stakeholders? If it doesn't, ask why and commit to doing something differently next time.
- Who is centered or featured most prominently and why?
- Are there people missing from this photo who were in the room?
- Would the people in this photo feel proud to be represented this way?

Common Pitfall: Posting the photo without a second look, then watching the comments roll in. By then, the damage is done and a public apology is not a substitute for inclusive planning. If there missteps, address them honestly along with a commitment and plan for doing better and being more inclusive in the future.

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Inclusive Event Planning Checklist

Use this checklist for every event. Print it, share it with your planning team, and check each item before, during, and after.

Before the Event

- [ ] Guest list reviewed for representation across race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, level, and background
- [ ] Date checked against religious and cultural observances
- [ ] Save the date or invite sent well in advance to allow invitees time to plan accordingly
- [ ] Venue is physically accessible and welcoming to all attendees
- [ ] Menu includes diverse dietary options (halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan, gluten free)
- [ ] Non-alcoholic beverage options are equally visible and available
- [ ] Dress code guidance provided to all attendees in advance
- [ ] Programming and speakers reviewed for representation and accessibility

During the Event

- [ ] Inclusive host and support team identified and briefed
- [ ] Intentional connection opportunities built into the agenda
- [ ] Concerns addressed in real time as they arise
- [ ] Active attention paid to who is engaged and who isn't

After the Event

- [ ] Feedback survey sent with inclusion and belonging questions
- [ ] Feedback summary shared with the team with clear commitments
- [ ] Photos reviewed before posting to internal or external channels

Inclusive events don’t happen by accident. They happen because someone asked the right questions before the invites went out.

Questions about how to plan an inclusive event? Get in Touch →

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